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WOMEN'S HEALTH RESEARCH

*Changing the Face of Medicine*

COPY

November 6, 2006

The Honorable Lois Capps  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Representative Capps:

On behalf of the Society for Women's Health Research, we would like to thank you for your efforts on behalf of women's health research during consideration of H.R. 6164, the National Institutes of Health Reform Act. Knowing of your past profession as a nurse, we understand just how important women's health and in particular, breast cancer are to you.

We were particularly interested in the amendment you offered during the floor debate on H.R. 6164 and wanted to take this opportunity to let you know about research currently being conducted or supported by the National Institutes of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) on the etiology of breast cancer and the role of environment.

The NIEHS Sister Study is the nations only large scale study that will prospectively study 50,000 sisters of women who have breast cancer. The study will follow these women for at least ten years to learn and understand the interplay of genes and environment in breast cancer and to identify potentially preventable risk factors. In addition to breast cancer, other diseases such as heart disease, osteoporosis, other hormonal cancers, and autoimmune diseases will be explored as well as genetic and environmental effects on prognosis. To date, more than 28,000 women have enrolled in the study and 14,000 have completed all baseline activities.

In addition to the large scale Sister Study, there are several extramural projects that NIEHS supports that we would like to highlight.

Perhaps mostly notably are the Breast Cancer and Environment Research Centers (BCERC). BCERC is a seven-year project jointly funded by the NIEHS and the National Cancer Institute studying the impact of prenatal-to-adult environmental exposures that may predispose a woman to breast cancer. Functioning as a consortium of basic scientists, epidemiologists, research translational units, and community advocates within and across centers, BCERC is investigating mammary gland development in animals

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Rep. Sue Myrick

and young girls to determine vulnerability to environmental agents that may influence breast cancer development in adulthood. This program has an annual funding level of \$5 million per year, for a total commitment of \$35 million. There are four institutions that comprise BCERC - Fox Chase Cancer Center in Philadelphia; Michigan State University; University of California San Francisco; and University of Cincinnati.

Each participating center has a Community Outreach & Translation Core (COTC) that is tasked with ensuring that the views and concerns of the breast cancer advocate community are heard and that the research findings are disseminated to the public. Members of a COTC include breast cancer advocates, public health professionals, researchers, and community-based organizations. The San Francisco Bay Area COTC, for example, is focusing on the on-going concerns about the development of breast cancer by focusing on mammary gland development during puberty when the breast may be especially vulnerable to environmental influences. By incorporating the skills of a broad spectrum of expertise in fields such as developmental biology, epidemiology, and community advocacy, this center will provide an exciting opportunity for trans-disciplinary research on a significant societal and biomedical challenge- understanding the relationship between breast cancer and the environment.

BCERC is also seeking to understand the impact of in-utero and early childhood environmental exposures on mammary gland development at the cellular, molecular, organ, and population levels and their influence on future breast cancer risk. By studying a multiethnic cohort of 500 girls ages 4-11, the researchers will be able to test their hypothesis that accelerated physical development and early onset of menarche increase breast cancer by lifetime exposure to and interaction of certain hormones.

In addition to its research efforts, BCERC also hosts an annual conference Early Environmental Exposures Meeting. The meeting includes the latest scientific findings from the BCERC and as well as presentations on the basic biology of breast development, environmental exposures that influence the onset of puberty, a risk factor for breast cancer, and public health communication of the risks associated with these exposures. This scientific meeting seeks to build on the growing interaction between biologic and epidemiological lines of research inquiry. Community participation and advocacy concerns are encouraged and are integrated into the discussions.

Another NIEHS supported interdisciplinary project is working to improve prevention and treatment for breast cancer by learning the pathogenesis of breast cancer, including both environmental and genetic factors. This project is working upon the hypothesis that the development and progression of breast cancer is a multistage process associated with molecular changes within cells. The results of these studies will provide important information on the potential link between environmental factors and increased incidence of breast cancer, on the roles of these critical signaling pathways in the pathogenesis of breast cancer, and on their use as biomarkers or potential therapeutic targets in novel treatments.

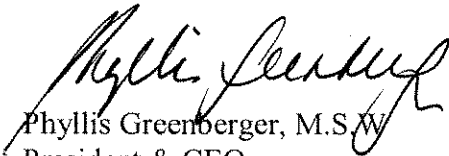
Further, an NIEHS-funded project is examining how certain environmental agents, including those found in some foods, mimic hormones that may lead to the development of cancer. Environmental and dietary factors likely play a major role in the development of breast cancer, yet what agents increase a women's risk of breast cancer are unknown. The research will help to better understand the genes and gene products that induce breast cancer and will further define potential mechanisms of breast cancer tumor development and growth. The results will enhance our understanding of the role of environmental exposures and certain foods within the development of breast cancer.


As you can see, NIEHS supports a wide range of interdisciplinary breast cancer research that work directly with community based organizations. While much work has yet to be done to understand the incredibly complex relationship between the human body and the environment and the chemicals we come in contact with on a daily basis, we believe NIEHS is moving in the right direction by supporting interdisciplinary research centers across the nation.

The Society has long been interested in the issue of environment and the impacts on health. We are greatly concerned about our continual exposure to chemicals while knowing very little about their impact on human health or if and how they affect men and women differently.

Thank you for your work on behalf of the health of our nation. We look forward to working with you to address these issues in the coming Congress.

Sincerely,

  
Phyllis Greenberger, M.S.W.  
President & CEO

  
Martha Nolan  
Vice President, Public Policy

Cc: The Honorable Nita Lowey  
The Honorable Sue Myrick  
The Honorable Charles Bass  
The Honorable Henry Waxman